



Scrutiny of Voids Management at Havebury Housing Partnership

1. SCOPE

The scope of the voids management scrutiny was agreed at the panel meeting of 10 February 2020 as follows:

- a) What are the barriers to reletting Havebury properties as quickly as possible and how can improvements be made?
- b) Is Havebury's void standard appropriate?

2. WHAT WE DID

The following methodology was agreed by panel members at the scoping meeting:

What will be reviewed	Details	How
Review of voids and lettings policy, procedure and processes	Examine Havebury's void policies, procedure and processes to determine whether they facilitate efficient and effective management of void properties	Desktop review
Interview consultant project manager	Interview the consultant project manager leading on the concurrent voids process review	Invite to PSP meeting
Review voids process	Understand each stage of the voids and allocations process to ascertain where there is potential for waste	Desktop review with consultant project manager
Interview Assistant Director of Customer Services	Interview AD of Customer Services and Voids and Allocations Manager to understand improvements already being made and their views on barriers to performance	Invite to PSP meeting
Data analysis	Analyse Havebury's void management data to identify trends and specific areas of underperformance, or examples where performance is more positive	Desktop review
Customer satisfaction	Review customer satisfaction and any complaints data relating to voids and allocations	Desktop review
Review voids standard and its application	Inspect void properties in line with current void standard	Site visits
Make recommendations	Review evidence to identify recommendations	Desktop exercise

The scrutiny review of voids was affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, with restrictions affecting the panel's activities. As a result, the review was conducted over a longer period, meetings held over Microsoft Teams and site visits replaced with panel being provided with videos of virtual viewings on properties ready to let.

Action	Date
Scrutiny scoping	2 February 2020
Meeting attended by Consultant Project Manager	2 February 2020
Review of void policy, procedure and process	2 February 2020
Analysis of voids performance data	5 October 2020
Meeting attended by Assistant Director of Customer Services and Voids and Allocations Manager	23 November 2020
Analysis of lettings customer satisfaction data	23 November 2020
Review of voids standard and virtual lettings	23 November 2020
Agree report and recommendations	11 January 2021

3. OUR FINDINGS

- 3.1 The scrutiny of voids management was triggered due it being an area which consistently failed to achieve its annual targets. In the panel's previous analyses of Havebury's performance, average void turnaround time - the average time taken to re-let empty properties - was identified as a measure it was important to improve. At the time of the scrutiny starting, average turnaround time was 44 days, compared to a target of 30.
- 3.2 In selecting voids as an area for scrutiny, the panel stated its importance to the availability of affordable housing, as well as maximising Havebury's income. The condition in which voids are let and the allocations service, create important first impressions on new tenants and can set the course of the future relationship with their landlord.
- 3.3 Starting before the panel's scrutiny, but with the outcomes of which running concurrently, Havebury conducted a review of its void processes which the panel aimed to complement. As such Havebury's consultant project manager - Richard Walker - was invited to the panel's first meeting at which it was discussed.
- 3.4 Void performance is measured in a variety of different of ways, with the main indicators being rent lost to voids as a percentage of annual rent debit and average void turnaround time. Being fairly broad however, and the calculation for average turnaround time in particular having some exclusions, the panel immediately recognised that additional indicators, or more in-depth analysis, is required to understand what is driving performance.

- 3.5 Rent loss to voids for example might increase due to greater tenancy terminations rather than worsening repairs/lettings performance, and average turnaround time may be skewed by a few hard to let properties. Proper data analysis and reporting of context was acknowledged as being critical to achieving a high performing voids and allocations service. In particular, the panel noted that data is not readily available to breakdown the time voids spend at each stage of the process.
- 3.6 Richard talked the panel through each stage of the voids and allocations process map and explained that voids technicians had recently been integrated into the responsive repairs team. This decision was taken due to Havebury's growth and the need to manage demand on all aspects of repairs and maintenance services most efficiently. The panel accepted this approach, but discussed the importance of ensuring synchronicity between having repairs completed and a prospective tenant ready to move in. Richard stated that if properly scheduled, a more flexible maintenance team (including voids) will realise efficient benefits in respect of travel times and improved resource distribution.
- 3.7 The voids process has many steps and therefore several points of possible failure. The panel explored suggestions on how the impact of these could be mitigated, and agreed that early access, inspection and scheduling of repair work gains Havebury significant advantage in turning a property around quickly. At the time of the scrutiny, this process was owned and managed by individual technicians and the panel considered whether for efficiency, consistency and better performance management of the repair element of voids, a technical co-ordinator should carry this out.
- 3.8 The verification of prospective tenants and shortlisting and contacting applicants to offer properties were identified as potential barriers to properties being let quickly. The panel understood that Havebury has to work within the limits of local choice-based lettings system, although they suggested processes should be looked at, if necessary with the local partnership and local authority, to ensure time is not being lost or to remove duplication.
- 3.9 The nature of choice-based lettings operating on a weekly cycle means time can quickly be lost. The allocations team has to verify applicants shortlisted which can lead to them not being offered a property they have bid on (because it is not/no longer suitable, or they are not/no longer eligible). Delays are also caused by having to allow applicants time to decide to accept/refuse the offer. The panel felt that Havebury should seek to ensure applicants are verified and ready to accept an offer should they come top of a shortlist.
- 3.10 The panel reviewed re-let time data for properties re-let during 2019/20 and analysed this alongside property and people characteristics for each void. It was noted that sheltered housing properties, bedsits, maisonettes and voids where the previous tenancy had failed (abandonments and evictions) carried longer average re-let times but were relatively few in number. In terms of property age, those between 40 and 54 years old took longest to let and made up 30% of voids. Newer properties outside Havebury's traditional operating area were let quickest.

- 3.11 Whilst some differences were identified, there were a variety of people and property characteristics amongst properties with the longest re-let times. These skewed the 2019/20 average re-let time (50 days), highlighted by the median re-let time (36) being 14 days lower.
- 3.12 Havebury's Voids and Allocations manager, Neil Whatley, took the panel through several void property examples, with both long and short turnaround times. The panel observed that often, reasons for a property taking longer to re-let were specific to its circumstances, but that it was possible to re-let some very quickly. The panel queried whether Havebury's single process for dealing with voids was therefore suitable in all cases and suggested that if properties were identified early as being easy or difficult to repair/let, whether application of different processes would help.
- 3.13 The panel looked at benchmarking data which set out that relative to the volume of tenancy terminations, Havebury has comparable staffing levels to other housing associations but that average re-let times were longer (sector median = 27 days). A major factor though was that Havebury is developing a significant number of new build properties which the team also must let. This adds significant pressure to staff resource.
- 3.14 Neil explained that Havebury had contacted other housing associations who appeared better performing, but that they were not doing too much different. It was recognised too that prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, monthly average turnaround times had fallen to below 30 days.
- 3.15 Amy St Ledger, Assistant Director of Customer Services, explained to the panel that improved performance had been achieved through closer oversight and performance management, reviewing properties weekly which had been empty more than 30 days and applying a more consistent, structured process to lettings e.g. shortlisting on the same day each week.
- 3.16 Through the regular COVID-19 dashboard, the panel saw that a pause on lettings at the beginning of the first COVID-19 lockdown meant that a backlog of voids had built up. The Voids and Allocations Team were now struggling to clear this due to an increased number of tenancy terminations and new build properties completing.
- 3.17 Amy and Neil stated they were confident that once the number of properties empty had reduced to typical levels, everything that had been put in place to improve performance previously would realise benefits again and future targets could be achieved. In addition, there were some positives arising from lockdown too, such as the introduction of virtual viewings and some automation which would help. The panel raised concern that not all applicants/tenants had access to technology, however Amy confirmed that Havebury was not moving to a position of 'digital by default'.
- 3.18 To assist in recovering Havebury's current position on voids, the panel were told that West Suffolk Council are assisting with verification and shortlisting and that additional resource had been provided to the team. The panel suggested whether

the relationship with West Suffolk could be reviewed longer term, especially in reducing any duplication e.g. verifying applicants.

- 3.19 The types of property being developed was discussed and the panel felt that there was demand for larger properties. It was explained that Havebury has little control of the size of property developed as this is usually decided by Planning. Local authorities are currently attempting to rebalance a lack of one and two-bedroom properties compared to demand from those in need on the waiting list. Localised issues where smaller properties are difficult to let because the market is saturated, can be due to demand changing between planning and completion, but moreover that councils are looking to meet demand which may develop over time, rather than immediately having 20 local applicants ready to move in.
- 3.20 The panel raised that longer-term future demand will look quite different. An ageing population means that some will require two bedrooms later in life for live-in carers or storage of equipment. Havebury, with local planning authorities, must consider the concept of lifetime homes which are, or can easily be, adapted.
- 3.21 For tenancy sustainment and so not to add unnecessary pressure to the system later on, Amy and Neil also explained the importance to match suitable applicants, in terms of need, to each property and not to focus purely on keeping turnaround times down.
- 3.22 It was questioned whether prospective tenants could be identified prior to new build properties being handed over, although this causes issues if completion dates change (which they often do). The panel were clear however, that new build completions appear to cause the team the most difficulty in terms of resourcing and can therefore have significant impact on their readiness to re-let existing properties.
- 3.23 It was suggested the existing partnership between the Voids and Allocations and Development teams was built upon and clear communication lines established for how and when new builds are handed over. A floating/flexible resource for letting of new schemes was felt would help manage the peaks and troughs in lettings workload as this appeared to have a consistent impact on the team's ability to turn around voids quickly.
- 3.24 The panel looked in detail at Havebury's policies and procedure in respect of voids and allocations and were satisfied that they would facilitate an effective, efficient and fair service. The voids standard was also reviewed.
- 3.25 The panel were shown virtual viewings of several void properties ready to let. Neil and Amy confirmed they were typical of Havebury's housing stock and the condition properties were let in. Whilst the properties varied in age and style, the panel felt that the standard of each was high. This contrasted with the personal experiences of some members who agreed significant improvements had been made.
- 3.26 The decorative condition seemed to be the most significant variable. It was explained that new tenants are provided with decoration vouchers with an

average value of £90, but sometimes up to £150 to help with the cost of equipment and materials.

- 3.27 The panel felt that whilst helpful, this might not always be enough, especially if the incoming tenant would struggle to decorate themselves. Flooring was discussed as being of significant expense and it was queried whether more could be done to support new tenants in this regard; perhaps Havebury considering more often to leave existing carpets in situ if the new tenant wishes to keep them. It was explained that this would be difficult to coordinate and that due to wear and tear, the existing flooring is usually unsuitable to be left.
- 3.28 In addition to their own observations, customer satisfaction data of new tenants was reviewed. 87% were satisfied with the quality of their home. Of those who were dissatisfied:
- Two provided no additional feedback and were not contactable after completing the survey
 - One was not Havebury related, the tenant was unhappy with the removal firm
 - One related to finding damp in the property, but a repair had been raised subsequently to fix a leak
 - One referred to decorative order of the bathroom, although was temporary accommodation
 - One related to the lettings service, availability of keys and that the end of the process felt rushed
 - Two were happy, but had either completed the survey incorrectly or had changed their mind

There were no recent complaints relating to the condition of voids.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on their findings the panel make the following recommendations:

1. Enhance availability of performance data in respect stages within the void process
2. Undertake a review of benefits and efficiencies achieved from integrating voids technicians within the responsive repairs team
3. Consider whether technical coordinators, rather than technicians, should be responsible for inspections and ordering and scheduling work
4. When safe to do so (i.e. post-COVID restrictions) maximise the benefit of pre-leave inspections and where possible, start repair work and the choice-based lettings process prior to the previous tenancy ending
5. Work with the local authority to identify whether improvements can be made to reduce duplication/delays in the verification process and if additional support provided during the COVID-19 epidemic is sustainable longer term
6. Regularly review the reasons for long term voids and understand any factors contributing to groups of properties identified as taking longer to re-let
7. Consider whether a single process for all voids is appropriate or whether voids could be triaged early in the process to determine whether an alternative approach may be beneficial
8. Review the improvement plan implemented successfully in late 2019/20 so it continues to be applied and Havebury benefits from virtual viewings and automation arising from changes to the service during the pandemic
9. Give due consideration to the future needs of an ageing population in Havebury's development strategy, major works improvement/regeneration programmes and in partnership work with local authorities
10. Review the Voids and Allocations Team's partnership with Development to improve lines of communication and consider whether a flexible resource could be made available to assist with allocations and letting, as new schemes handover
11. Keep under the review the void standard to maintain the right balance between investment and customer expectations. Consider whether the decoration voucher scheme continues to offer value and could be extended so that tenants can decide to use them as a contribution towards flooring

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we refer to the questions we aimed to answer at the beginning of the scrutiny:

QUESTION	CONCLUSION
a) What are the barriers to reletting Havebury properties as quickly as possible and how can improvements be made?	<p>Peaks and troughs in the allocations and lettings team workload due to new build handovers can negatively impact performance</p> <p>Longer average turnaround times are driven by a minority of long term voids and further investigation should be carried out to mitigate the impact of these</p> <p>The panel found that under normal circumstances, Havebury had been successful in improving void turnaround times and meeting its targets</p> <p>As Havebury emerges from COVID-19 restrictions, the panel's recommendations will support the organisation to return to a position of positive performance</p>
b) Is Havebury's void standard appropriate?	<p>The panel were satisfied with the application of the current void standard, that it is appropriate and has improved in recent years</p> <p>It is recommended that the standard is kept under constant review to maintain balance between investment and tenant expectations</p>